



FINDING FAITH

STUDY GUIDE FOR LENT
BY
DARREN CUSHMAN WOOD
NORTH UMC

North United Methodist Church
3808 N. Meridian St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
NorthChurchIndy.com

FINDING FAITH

**A STUDY GUIDE
FOR LENT**

**BY DARREN CUSHMAN WOOD
SENIOR PASTOR
NORTH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Copyright © 2022, North United Methodist Church
3808 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, IN 46208.
All rights reserved.
NorthChurchIndy.com

Ash Wednesday: Introduction

According to a survey by the software company Pixie, each year the average American spends the equivalent of 2.5 days searching for lost items. The number one item that gets lost is the TV remote control. Americans spend \$2.7 billion annually to replace all this stuff.

It takes more than 2.5 days to relocate your faith. According to traditional estimates, it takes 40 days — minus Sundays — to find it. That is how long Lent is. The season of Lent has been a time to rediscover and renew one's faith in preparation for Easter, the day we celebrate the birth of our faith in the risen Christ.

We have been through a lot these past couple of years, and perhaps you have lost your faith along the way. Or maybe your faith has grown weary from the uncertainties and anxieties.

“Finding Faith” is a guide to help you rediscover and renew your faith in Christ. Each week we will explore one of five pathways to a deeper and fuller experience of God: surrender, adoration, suffering, struggle, and dedication. Each one marks a major stream of spiritual thought and practice in church history.

Regardless of the path, the goal is the same: to live in the holy love of God. God is love and it is God's desire that we live in love, with God, with one another, and with one's self (1 John 4:8). To be able to do this, God gives God's own self, first in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then continues

to give us that love through the Spirit. This is the trinity of love that fulfills us.

I call it “holy love” to distinguish it from the mistaken idea that love starts with us. Love begins with God. Our ability to love arises from God’s love saturating us. Faith is trusting in the trinity of love to shape us and guide us to love others like Jesus. And so, as we love one another it is truly holy.

Faith is not merely something we do or a feeling we whip up in ourselves. It is not our intellectual assent to a set of propositions, nor is it a dedication to an ethical ideal. The goal begins as a gift — the gift of holy love — so that we can by faith pursue the goal of living more fully and completely in love.

John Wesley described the gift and goal of holy love with an analogy to breathing:

*“It immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit: God breathing into the soul, and the soul’s breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus.”*¹

This Lent we will take “breathing lessons” in holy love. Each week we will be guided by the example of five characters in the Gospel of Luke and five people from Christian tradition. The five Gospel char-

acters are role models to help us find faith. The five “spiritual ancestors” offer us examples and insights of the timeless struggles of faith. I selected them from the traditions and eras that go beyond Protestantism to help us expand our appreciation for the larger tradition of Christian spirituality. You may not always agree with them, but think of them as conversation partners in the Spirit. These 10 are part of what Hebrews called “a mighty cloud of witnesses” that are cheering us on as we strive toward the goal of holy love (12:1).

In addition, each week features a hymn which we will sing on Sunday. They are songs from our Protestant tradition. Listen closely and you will hear themes shared by the spiritual ancestors. The desire for holy love spans all traditions and generations.

To help you apply what you learn, each week includes reflection questions on the scripture lesson, a meditation exercise, and six additional scripture verses about the topic of the week. The study is designed for personal use and small groups. It offers multiple ways for you to find your faith through reading, singing, praying, and reflecting.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have you ever thought of “holy love” as the central focus of Christian faith?
- What barriers are you facing that get in the way of you living more fully in holy love?
- What do you hope to discover about God or yourself this Lent?

Week One: Finding Faith Through Surrender

INTRODUCTION

Lent does not begin with loud declarations but with quiet surrender. The journey of faith begins with surrendering our lives to Christ. As the hymn says:

*“All to Jesus I surrender: all to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him,
in his presence daily live.
I surrender all, I surrender all,
all to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.”*

Before we make a commitment or dedicate our lives to God, we must let go and let God take control. Lent calls us to let go of our pride and our shame, our past guilt and our future expectations, our sinful thoughts and our bad habits.

We surrender to a greater purpose. We surrender our lives to Christ so we can receive the greater life and higher purpose of Christ. This is what Jesus promised the disciples that day on the boat. Surrender is a means to the greater end of experiencing the fullness of God’s life-giving and loving presence.

This week we encounter Patrick, the bishop of Ireland, as an example of surrendering to God’s unpredictable will. In his “Confession” he described the moment he surrendered his life to follow Christ in mission to the Irish:

“Now I was able to hand over the freedom of my birth for the benefit of others. And should I prove worthy,

I am ready and willing to give up my own life, without hesitation for this name.”

As you begin the Lenten season, what do you need to surrender to God?

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE: *LUKE 5:1-11*

● As you read the story, imagine you are on the boat with Simon and the other men. What do you see, smell and feel? How do you react to what you see and hear?

● In v. 5 Simon is frustrated with his work. What frustrations are you experiencing in your life right now?

● Why did Simon react the way he did in v. 8?

● What are the two things Jesus says to Simon in v. 10? What might Simon have been afraid of?

● At the end, Simon and the others leave everything to follow Jesus. What are they giving up and what are they gaining by surrendering their lives to Jesus?

● What scares us about surrendering to God?

● Which of the following might be difficult for you to “let go and let God” take control of in your life:

___ my future

___ my past

___ my family relationships

___ my career and work

___ my financial situation

___ my emotional health

___ my physical health

___ my view of myself

___ my reputation

___ a cherished belief

___ a bad habit

___ my sins

- What greater thing might you receive if you surrender your life to God?

INSIGHTS FROM OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS:

PATRICK

Beyond the green beer and parades, there is an inspiring story of St. Patrick's faith. Born in Roman Britain, Patrick (ca. 385-461) was the son of a senator and the grandson of a priest. According to his "Confession," he was taken captive by Irish raiders when he was 16. While working as a slave in Ireland he came to faith in Christ. After six years he heard a voice calling him to escape by stowing away on a ship bound for Britain. When he returned he began studying for the priesthood. One night he had a vision of St. Victorinus carrying letters. One of the letters was addressed to him from the Irish people, asking him to return. He spent the rest of his life evangelizing and establishing the church in Ireland.

Patrick's example of surrendering to God's will is set against the backdrop of struggle in his ministry. He left only two writings, and both of them describe the hardships he faced that would have tempted him to give up on his calling.

His "Confession" is an autobiography defending his calling before some skeptical British bishops. In his "Letter to Coroticus" he pleads with a Pict warlord for the release of young converts who had been kidnapped by his soldiers. Like Peter, Jesus called Pat-

rick on an unpredictable and dangerous journey of “fishing for people.”

The hymn “Patrick’s Lorica,” (which means breastplate and is also known as the “Deer’s Cry,” *Fáeth Fiada*) was most likely not written by him but expresses the sentiment and tradition of his spirituality. It comes from a period of great danger for him and the monks, and it was sung as they traveled to unfamiliar and dangerous locations. It expresses the theme of surrendering one’s life in following Christ wherever He leads. Here is part of the Lorica:

*“I arise today in a mighty strength,
calling upon the Trinity,
believing in the Three Persons
saying they are One
thanking my Creator.
I arise today strengthened
by Christ’s own baptism
made strong by his crucifixion and his burial
made strong by his resurrection and his ascension
made strong by his descent to me
on the day of doom...
Christ protect me today against poison,
against burning, against drowning, against wounding
so that I may come to enjoy your rich reward.
Christ ever with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ to my right side, Christ to my left,
Christ in his breadth, Christ in his length,
Christ in depth.
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,*

*Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me
Christ in every eye that sees me
Christ in every ear that hears me.*^{vi}

MEDITATION EXERCISE: *PALMS DOWN, PALMS UP*

Step 1: Remove as many distractions as possible. Take several slow, deep breaths.

Step 2: Hold your hands palms down and envision giving all your burdens to God. Imagine these things falling out of your hands.

Step 3: When you can imagine your hands empty, turn your hands palms up and think about what you need from God. Imagine God putting those things in your hands.

Step 4: Close by reciting the selection from Patrick's "Lorica."

FEATURE HYMN: *"I SURRENDER ALL"*
(#354 "The United Methodist Hymnal")

SCRIPTURE GUIDE

Psalm 37:7

Psalm 62: 1

Psalm 131:2

Romans 12:1

Galatians 2:20

1 Peter 5:6-7

Week Two: Finding Faith Through Adoration

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally Lent has a reputation for being a season of gloom and doom. Over the centuries it has been a time of spiritual renunciation as a practice that leads to God. Even today many people give something up for Lent.

However, this week we focus on adoration as the path to God. One of the essential ways God deepens our faith is through beauty and praise. The mystics were noted for their extravagant visions of spiritual ecstasy. One such fellow was a deacon from the East named Ephrem. His experience of adoration echoes the example of the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus's feet.

One need not have a vision to experience how adoration expands your trust in Christ. Nor do you need to have perfect pitch to sing "O for a thousand tongues, my great Redeemer's praise!" This week we explore how adoration helps us find our faith.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE: *LUKE 7:36-50*

● When you read the story, imagine you are one of the guests watching and hearing everything that happens. Read it twice. The first time imagine you are the Pharisee Simon. The second time imagine you are one of Jesus's disciples. How would you react to the woman and to Jesus in each role?

- In v. 37 she is described as a “sinner,” but it does not say how she got this negative reputation. Have you ever been judged and looked down upon by others?
- She expresses her joy for Jesus. How do you express joy?
- Look closely in v. 38 at her three actions — she washes his feet with her tears, she kisses his feet, and she anoints his feet. Think of these as three metaphors for adoration. For you, what is this the equivalent of?
- The alabaster jar of oil was expensive. What is your “alabaster jar” that you need to give to Christ as an expression of your gratitude?
- Verses 39-50 add an extended conversation about forgiveness and gratitude. When have you experienced forgiveness that made you feel relieved and grateful?
- Jesus’s final words to the woman were “Your faith has saved you, go in peace” (v. 50). What did he save her from?

INSIGHTS FROM OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS:
EPHREM THE SYRIAN

This week we go from Patrick’s Ireland to the other end of the Roman Empire to meet Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373). Ephrem served as a deacon and teacher in Nisibis, a town on the easternmost frontier of the Empire (modern day southeast Turkey). Ephrem is best known for his hymns, which he wrote in Syriac. After his death he became a popular figure

who inspired several legendary biographies and hymns that became a staple of theology in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

He wrote hymns in a context of ongoing strife. During his ministry, Nisibis was besieged three times by the Persian army. During the last siege, the Persian King Shapur II dammed the river and flooded the surrounding area. (In one of his hymns, Ephrem compares the town to Noah's ark, which includes this line: "The ark subdued the waves through your love.")

In 363 the Roman emperor Julian was killed during his military expansion into Persian territory. As part of the peace treaty, Nisibis was handed over to the Persians, and one of the conditions was the expulsion of the Christian population. Ephrem and many other Christians resettled in Edessa (modern Urfa, Turkey).

His hymns should be seen as a hopeful response to these events. In spite of these tragedies, he envisioned God's glory as overwhelming and transforming our lives with peace and joy. He included all believers in the call to praise and adoration. According to a biographical hymn by Jacob of Serugh:

*"The blessed Ephrem saw
that the women were silent from praise
and in his wisdom he decided
that it was right that they should sing out...
This is what Ephrem said to the pure women
as he instructed them how to sing praise:...
You put on the robe of praise from the Font,*

*as did your brothers,
and from the single Chalice
did you receive new life along with them.”ⁱⁱⁱ*

This week’s selections come from his “Hymns on Paradise.” This collection of songs uses paradise as a complex metaphor of our union with God. Ephrem’s word-picture transcends the ordinary sense of time by combining Eden and heaven, our experience of the Holy Spirit in the present, stories of the past in the Old Testament, and visions of cosmic restoration in the future. At the heart of his elaborate visions is the delight we receive when we worship God with praise and adoration:

*“And because my tongue overflows
as one who has sucked
the sweetness of paradise,
I will portray it in diverse forms...
gloriously woven
is the wreath of paradise
that encircles the whole of creation.”*

Like the woman with the alabaster jar, Ephrem was caught up in the emotions of devotion that expressed his faith:

*“Paradise delighted me
as much by its peacefulness as by its beauty;
in it there resides a beauty
that has no spot;
in it exists a peacefulness
that knows no fear.
How blessed is that person
accounted worthy to receive it.”*

*“Make me worthy through Your grace
to attain to paradise’s gift
— this treasure of perfumes,
this storehouse of scents.
My hunger takes delight
in the breath of its fragrance,
for its scent gives nourishment to all
at all times,
and whoever inhales it
is overjoyed and forgets his earthly bread;
this is the table of the Kingdom —
blessed is the one who prepared it in Eden.”*

Instead of fixating on the moral effectiveness of faith or on verifying the truth of doctrines, Ephrem emphasized meditation on God’s beauty. The practice of adoration leads the believer to an ever-deeper desire for the beauty of God:

*“Grant, Lord, that I and those dear to me
may together there
find the very last remnants
of your gift!
Just the sight of your dear one
is a fountain of delight;
whoever is worthy
to be ravished thereby
will despise ordinary food;
all who look upon you
will be sustained by your beauty.
Praises be to your splendor!”*

MEDITATION EXERCISE:
REJOICING THREE TIMES A DAY

Based on Daniel 6:10, there is an old tradition in Christianity of facing east and praying three times a day. Facing east is based on the Natal Star shining in the east at Jesus' birth, and the hope of the second coming of Christ from the east (Matthew 24:27).

This exercise will help you develop a daily rhythm of short prayers to mark your day. Decide in advance the three times of the day that you will pause for prayer. These moments are very short, just a couple of minutes. Each time you pray, recall a moment earlier in the day for which you want to give God thanks. Offer one of the following verses or a similar verse in praise to God:

"Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised."

"I will sing of your steadfast love God, forever."

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

*"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me
bless God's holy name."*

FEATURE HYMN:
"O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING"
(#57 "The United Methodist Hymnal")

SCRIPTURE GUIDE

Psalms 96:1

Philippians 4:8

Psalms 103:1

Colossians 3:17

Ephesians 3:14

Hebrews 13:15

Week Three: Finding Faith Through Suffering

INTRODUCTION

“All will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing will be well,” wrote Julian of Norwich. But it is hard to see how everything will be well when we are in the middle of hard times. Such was the dilemma of the woman in this week’s story.

Whether your problem is physical or mental, a recent crisis or a chronic pain, suffering challenges our faith. Throughout the scriptures and history, believers have also found new dimensions of faith through suffering. In no way is this a recommendation that you make yourself suffer, which is a sign of a malfunctioning faith. But when “stuff happens,” God makes a way for us to find comfort and meaning as part of the healing process.

This week we will explore how Jesus does this in our lives and how we can be able to sing:

*“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.”^{iv}*

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE: *LUKE 8:42b-48*

● As you read the story, imagine you are one of the disciples. What do you see, hear, and feel standing in the crowd with Jesus? What are your impressions of the woman and how do you react to what Jesus says?

- What risk did the woman take in being in the crowd and touching him?
- She suffered for 12 years. Have you experienced a hardship over an extended period of time? If so, how did it affect:
 - your outlook?
 - your faith?
 - your relationships?
- What do you need healing and comfort for?
- What do you need to hear Christ saying to you in your moment of suffering?
- What risk do you need to take to experience Christ?
- How might your suffering deepen your faith?

INSIGHTS FROM OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS:
JULIAN OF NORWICH

Julian of Norwich (1343-1413) was a Benedictine nun whose writings continue to inspire theological reflection. She is one of the most famous English nuns, but little is known about her life — including whether or not her real name was Julian. In 14th and 15th century England there were over 130 small communities of nuns, and many more lived alone (“ anchoresses”). Julian was an anchoress who lived in a cell attached to St. Julian’s Church in Norwich.

At age 30 she suffered a nearly fatal illness during which she experienced a series of detailed visions of the Passion of Christ. She wrote down these visions in two writings (a short text and a long text) called “Showings.” Running throughout the texts are

the themes of the motherhood of the trinity, the goodness of God, and the solidarity of Christ in our suffering.

Although inevitable, our suffering is not God's will:^v

"God is that goodness which cannot be angry, for God is nothing but goodness. Our soul is united to God who is unchangeable goodness...for our souls are so wholly united to God, through God's own goodness, that between God and our soul nothing can interpose."...therefore we may with reverence ask from our lover all that we will, for our natural will is to have God, and God's goodwill is to have us, and we can never stop willing or loving until we possess God in the fullness of joy."

"It is not God's will that when we feel pain we should pursue it in sorrow and mourning for it, but that suddenly we should pass it over, and preserve ourselves in the endless delight which is God."

Julian of Norwich's visions of the crucifixion — which are detailed and graphic — are expressions of divine solidarity with human suffering. Through our union with His suffering, human suffering takes on meaning, is ultimately overcome, and gives way to a mystical bliss in this life and for eternity:

"I understood that in our Lord's intention we are now on his cross with him in our pains, and in our sufferings we are dying, and with his help and his grace we willingly endure on that same cross until the last moment of life. Suddenly He will change his appearance for us, and we shall be with him in heaven...But because He shows us his suffering, as He was in this life

as He carried his cross, we are therefore in suffering and labor with him as our nature requires.”

Even today many believers find meaning and comfort for their suffering through meditation on the cross. They identify with the suffering Jesus and the story of his Passion gives expression for their suffering.

For example, in her book “Trauma and Grace,” Serene Jones describes the reaction of women who had survived abuse to the suffering of Jesus. She had led a women’s self-defense class at her church. The last session coincided with the church’s Maundy Thursday service. To her surprise, four women attended the service:

“Two sat alone, two sat together, and as they lost themselves in the growing darkness of the liturgy, they all wept, silently, profusely. So did most others. After the service, Mari spoke to me first, ‘This cross story...it’s the only part of this Christian thing I like; I get it. And it’s like He gets me. He knows.’ She hugged me and walked out. Shanika left next, saying something about Jesus standing between her and her ex-partner, taking blows meant for her, keeping her safe. Sarah, her closest friend from the shelter, disagreed, smiling. ‘He’s the King, man. He’s throwing your ex’s sorry ass in hell’s jail soon as he can.’ Joanne, the last to leave, didn’t say anything but gestured toward the cross with a slight shrug just before walking out the door.”^{vi}

These women share Julian’s heart. The cross is not an abstract theological treatise; it is the embodiment of divine solidarity that comforts and heals.

This perspective on the cross, which emphasizes Jesus's solidarity with human suffering, offers a different perspective on the crucifixion. Other theologies interpret the cross as a substitution for divine punishment. In Julian's vision, the suffering of Christ is God's love that creates a pathway toward healing through divine empathy.

MEDITATION EXERCISE: *PRAYER OF THE HEART*

This is a type of breath prayer using two simple phrases — an attribute of God on the inhalation and a petition on the exhalation.

Step 1: Take about four deep, slow breaths and allow the tension of the day to flow out with each exhalation.

Step 2: Reflect on this question: What do you need at this moment? Spend time with the question so that you go beneath the surface-level desires to explore what you truly need.

Step 3: Summarize your desire in one or two words. For example, if you need peace, your phrase may be "inner peace," "lasting peace," or simply "peace."

Step 4: Reflect on this question: What name for or attribute of God comes to mind? For example: Lord, Jesus, Father, Mother, Almighty, Spirit. Attributes include: merciful, wise, faithful, generous.

Step 5: Combine the divine name with your longing and repeat the prayer with the name on the inhalation and the desire on the exhalation while using "my" or "give me" to connect the two. For example, "Mighty God, give me peace" or "Lord, my lasting

peace.” Spend several moments with this prayer and then use it throughout your day.

FEATURE HYMN: *“IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL”*
(#377 “The United Methodist Hymnal”)

SCRIPTURE GUIDE

Psalms 28:1

Lamentations 3:19-24

Matthew 11:28

Romans 8:26

2 Corinthians 12:9

1 Peter 3:14

Week Four: Finding Faith Through Struggle

INTRODUCTION

Finding faith is never an easy process. Just ask the man who was blind as he heard Jesus passing by. This week we explore the ways God challenges our faith. When we take on the challenges, wrestle with the questions, and struggle against the temptations, we develop a stronger faith.

Such was Charles Albert Tindley's testimony. Tindley (1851-1933) wrote this week's feature hymn, which begins, "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me."

The storms began early in his life. When he was 4 his mother died, and by age 5 he was separated from his father. When he was 17 he taught himself how to read and write while working as a hod carrier and janitor for a Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia. He went on to night school and then to seminary by correspondence at Boston University School of Theology. He was ordained and became a leading light in the denomination.

This week we learn how God leads us into experiences that Saint John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul" as a way to mature our faith.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE: *LUKE 18:35-43*

- As you read the story imagine you are the blind beggar. What do you hear? How do you feel?
- When does God feel distant from you?

- What obstacles did the beggar face in getting Jesus's attention?
- What obstacles do you face in going to a deeper level in your faith?
- If Jesus asked you "What do you want me to do for you?," what would you say?
- What spiritual insights might God be showing you?

INSIGHTS FROM OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS:
JOHN OF THE CROSS

Born Juan de Yepes y Álvarez, John of the Cross (1542-1591) came from a Jewish family who had converted to Catholicism in Old Castile, Spain. His parents descended into poverty, and his father died when he was 3. While working at a hospital he was educated by Jesuits. He joined the Carmelite order, and was ordained a priest in 1567. Soon afterwards he met the Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila and became a proponent of her movement to reform the religious order.

In 1577 he was imprisoned and tortured by opponents of the reform movement. During this time he composed his "Spiritual Canticle." After eight months in solitary confinement, he managed to escape. He reunited with Teresa and continued to provide leadership to the reforms.

In addition to the "Spiritual Canticle," he penned "Dark Night of the Soul," which describes the process of the soul's mystical union with God. It begins with an allegorical poem based on his escape from imprisonment. It describes the inevitable strug-

gles of discovering a deeper experience of faith:
“At a certain point in the spiritual journey God will draw a person from the beginning stage to a more advanced stage. At this stage the person will begin to engage in religious exercises and grow deeper in the spiritual life. Such souls will likely experience what is called ‘the dark night of the soul.’ The ‘dark night’ is when those persons lose all the pleasure that they once experienced in their devotional life. This happens because God wants to purify them and move them on to greater heights, which is the union of the soul with God.”^{vii}

The spiritual honesty of “The Dark Night of the Soul” continues to resonate with a diverse range of persons from missionary Mother Teresa to singer-songwriter Van Morrison.

MEDITATION EXERCISE:
BREATH PRAYER ON VERSE 38

A breath prayer is a short petition or praise in rhythm with your breathing that helps you become aware of God’s presence.

In this version, a short phrase or scripture verse is used. The first half of it is said or thought as you inhale, and the second half is said or thought as you exhale.

This week, use verse 38 as your breath prayer: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Step 1: Determine the amount of time you will designate for your breath prayer. Sit for a moment in silence and remember that God holds you in a loving presence.

Step 2: Settle into a comfortable position and begin to slow down your breathing. Take long, deep breaths using the full capacity of your lungs, and relax your body.

Step 3: You may want to close your eyes as you silently recall the phrase. Pause after each part of the phrase to take three to four deep breaths before moving to the next part of the phrase. Slowly sync your inhalation and exhalation with the parts of the phrase.

Step 4: For the next five minutes, just breathe. Become aware of the rhythm of your breath. Do not analyze or interpret the phrase. Don't repress or scrutinize your thoughts, but let them pass through your mind. Simply be in God's presence.

Step 5: Return to the phrase. As before, slowly sync your breathing with the phrase.

Step 6: Slowly come to the end of meditating on the phrase and open your eyes.

FEATURE HYMN: *"STAND BY ME"*
(#512 "The United Methodist Hymnal")

SCRIPTURE GUIDE

Isaiah 43:2

Galatians 6:9

Philippians 3:12

Hebrews 2:18

James 1:2-4

2 Peter 3:8-9

Week Five: Finding Faith Through Dedication

INTRODUCTION

We began the season with surrender and we come full circle with practices of dedication. Surrendering to God's direction opens your life to complete dedication to the cause of Christ. Our faith is expressed by denying ourselves and taking up our cross to follow the example of Jesus in serving the world. Through dedication, God is able to transform our priorities and habits. We see this in the story of Zacchaeus. When the children's song ends, the story goes on with radical challenges for our lives.

Zacchaeus was a kindred spirit with Thomas à Kempis, who wrote one of the most famous books of devotional literature, "The Imitation of Christ." It still offers insights and inspiration for us today.

As we come to the end of Lent, we reflect on what it means to renew our dedication to Christ in preparation for the Easter celebration.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE: *LUKE 19:1-10*

- As you read the story imagine you are one of the people who has had to pay taxes to Zacchaeus. You are in the crowd, and you see what Zacchaeus does and you hear his conversation with Jesus. What are your impressions of Zacchaeus and Jesus?
- Why do you think Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus?
- He climbed a tree to see Jesus. What are you willing to do to encounter Christ?

- What does it mean for Jesus to “stay at your house today?”
- What changes do you need to make for Jesus to be your highest priority?
 - Money?
 - Time?
 - Skills and knowledge?
 - Career?
 - Relationships?

INSIGHTS FROM OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS:
THOMAS À KEMPIS

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) was born in the Rhineland to a blacksmith and schoolmistress. He followed his brother into a religious order that was influenced by the Brethren of the Common Life. The Brethren of the Common Life was a pietistic Catholic movement in the Netherlands devoted to voluntary poverty and communal living. Thomas was not ordained, but served his community by writing and copying biblical manuscripts.

“The Imitation of Christ” is a devotional manual written between 1418-1427. It was passed along for many years with no author attributed to it. Since then, it has been one of the most popular devotional books in Christian history. “The Imitation of Christ” was a favorite source of inspiration for John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

It begins with a challenge to his fellow brothers to go beyond the outward forms of religion to a complete devotion to Christ:^{viii}

“If we were as diligent in uprooting vices and planting virtues as we are in debating abstruse questions, there would not be so many evils or scandals among us, nor such laxity in monastic communities. Certainly when Judgment Day comes we shall not be asked what books we have read, but what deeds we have done; we shall not be asked how well we have debated, but how devoutly we have lived.”

Self-denial is a key theme. In the third part he illustrates this with a dialog between Jesus and a disciple:

“Jesus: ‘Full liberty will never be yours, my child, unless you totally deny yourself. Everyone who seeks and loves only himself is held fast by heavy chains; they are a selfish busybody who always seeks their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ; whatever they plan or accomplish will not last long, for everything that does not come from God will certainly perish. Hold on to this pithy but pregnant phrase: Forsake everything and you will find everything. Set all your desires aside and you will find rest. Reflect long on this point and when you have put it into practice, you will understand all things.’”

Self-denial leads to a greater and deeper joy in Christ. In this prayer, Thomas describes the desire: *“Deepen my love so that I may learn to savor in my inmost being how sweet it is to love, how sweet it is to be dissolved and float on a sea of love. Let love take possession of me and let me rise far above myself with unheard of fervor and wonder. Let me sing love’s canticle and let me follow you, my beloved, to the very heights. Let my soul become lost in praising*

you and in rejoicing in your love. Let me love you more than I love myself, and let me love myself only for the love of you.”

MEDITATION EXERCISE:
WESLEYAN COVENANT PRAYER

Each New Year’s Eve or Day, early Methodists observed a covenant service to reaffirm their faith. As part of that service they prayed the following prayer. This week, set aside time every day to pray it, perhaps at the beginning of your day or as a bedtime prayer:

*“I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”^{ix}*

FEATURE HYMN:
“LORD, I WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN”
(#402 “The United Methodist Hymnal”)

SCRIPTURE GUIDE

Leviticus 20:7-8

Psalms 56:12

Proverbs 16:3

Mark 8:34-37

Philippians 3:8

FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ“The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) III.2.

ⁱⁱFrom *The Confession of Saint Patrick*. trans. John Skinner (New York: Image Books, 1998).

ⁱⁱⁱAll quotes taken from *Hymns on Paradise*. trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990).

^{iv}*The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) 377.

^vAll quotes taken from *Julian of Norwich Showings*. trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

^{vi}*Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 76.

^{vii}From *Devotional Classics*. ed. Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990) 33.

^{viii}All quotes taken from *The Imitation of Christ*. trans. Joseph N. Tylenda, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

^{ix}*Hymnal*, 607.

ABOUT THE FRONT COVER:

The artwork is part of “The Banner of the Teaching of Light and Love” that was designed and created by the late Doris Douglas in 1982. According to her notes, “This banner embodies the height of expression in fabric, incorporating many colors and a variety of types of fabrics...Light shades of color are used in the beginning of going into the area of ‘all lives.’ This is to show and seek the introduction to a new chapter of spiritual life. Many French knots were used to suggest the following of the disciples around the area of Galilee...Tones of purple shape the cross. White French knots create movement of the Spirit moving in Jesus, forming the pain that Jesus suffered as he died on the cross...”

This banner and other banners by Douglas and her team are part of North’s worship experience each Sunday.

Notes

North United Methodist Church
3808 N. Meridian St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208

